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AUTHOR Peng, Samuel S.
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ABSTRACT

In recent years, more than 25 percent of potential graduates--more than one million youngsters annually--left school without graduating. The dropout rate is even higher for Blacks, Hispanics and students from families of lower socioeconomic status. Since the dropout problem is closely related to broad social issues, such as youth unemployment, transition of youth into the labor market, intergroup disparities in economic opportunities, higher labor productivity and increased competitiveness of American industries, an effort to obtain information needed to describe and understand the dropout phenomenon would be a prudent investment for our society. Toward that goal, this paper synthesizes statistical information from a variety of sources. Eight statistical tables are included. The following dropout issues are discussed: (1) the difficulty of making accurate estimates because of the variety of definitions and measurements used; (2) the extent of the problem; and (3) reasons for dropping out. In general, dropping out of school limits economic opportunity. Many dropouts recognize this limitation and eventually seek further training. (PS)

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HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS: A NATIONAL CONCERN

by Samuel S. Peng
National Center for Education Statistics
U.S. Department of Education

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Executive Summary

To further understanding into the extent and nature of the problem of dropouts, thi paper synthesizes statistical information from a variety of sources. Much of the discussion in the text is based on statistics shown in eight accompanying tables.

Estimates of how many students drop out of school vary, in part because definitions of "dropout" vary. All estimates indicate that the dropout phenomena is widespread, however, and it seems clear that more than one in four students now leaves high school without graduating.

The data show that, in general, dropping out of school limits economic opportunity. They also show that many dropouts recognize this limitation, after acknowledging that the decision to leave school was not a good one and sometimes going into further training.

Also described are some of the reasons students give for dropping out of school.

HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS: A NATIONAL CONCERN

Students who leave school before they graduate have long concerned education policy makers. Publication of A Nation at Risk by the National Commission on Excellence in Education and of the Secretary of Education's "wall chart" heightened concern. More recently, the National Commission on Secondary Education for Hispanics has reported on the problems of Hispanic students.

Many educators think a high dropout rate is caused by a failure of the educational system to meet the aspirations and special needs of students. They also believe that dropping out has adverse personal and social consequences. But before the dropout problem can be addressed, it must be clearly understood. The primary purpose of this paper is to synthesize some data that describe the extent of the problem, the adverse personal and social consequences of dropping out of school, and the reasons students give for dropping out.

The Extent of the Problem

What percent of students leave school before they complete graduation requirements? How do dropout rates vary by student and school? Answers to these seemingly straightforward questions depend on how "dropout" is defined.

The Census Bureau defines dropouts as "persons who are not enrolled in school and who are not high school graduates (or equivalent)" (Digest of Education Statistics, 1983-84). That is, being a dropout is a condition rather than an irreversible attribute. Someone who is a dropout now may later return to school or complete a General Educational Development (GED) program; an 18-year-old who is in high school on the survey date may drop out of school later. The Census Bureau's definition, then, allows no final answer to the question of how many students in a given cohort drop out of school.

Schools or school districts tend to define a dropout as "a person who left school without graduating." This permits a definite answer to the question of how many students dropped out from a given cohort, but it makes no allowance for the fact that some "dropouts" will eventually obtain high school diplomas or equivalent degrees. Both definitions yield measures for the magnitude of the dropout problem. The difference between the two measures reveals the extent to which some students need educational services shortly after they leave school without graduating.

The proportion of a certain segment of population who were not in school and did not graduate from high school can be estimated from Current Population Survey (CPS) data collected by the Bureau of Census. In October 1981, for example, about 2% of 14- to 15-year-old youth dropped out of school. The percentage increased to 8% for the 16- to 17-year-olds and 16% for the 18- to 19-year-olds (Table 1). (The dropout rate increased for White males but decreased for Blacks between 1971 and 1981.) CPS estimates may be on the low side, however, because the CPS does not include military and institutional segments of the population.

From the number of high school graduates and the number of enrollments a few years earlier provided by school systems, another set of dropout rates can be estimated. These rates have remained around 25% over the last decade (Table 2). They are higher than the

figures provided by the Bureau of Census, perhaps because many of these "dropouts" eventually returned to school or enrolled in a GED program. These events may not have taken place, however, or they may not have been recorded when the data were collected from school systems.

Another measure of dropout rate is the percent of the 17- or 18-year-old population who are not high school graduates. This rate increased from about 24% in 1972 to 28% in 1982 (Table 3). This statistic, too, does not reflect the fact that some of these dropouts may eventually graduate.

Another national estimate was obtained from the High School and Beyond data (HS&B). HS&B is a longitudinal study of students who were sophomores and seniors in 1980. Its base-year survey involved more than 30,000 sophomores and 28,000 seniors from 1,015 high schools throughout the country. From this sample, it is estimated that about 14% of 1980 sophomores dropped out of school before graduation (Table 4). Because some students dropped out before they became sophomores, this underestimates the overall dropout rate.

Although these figures do not agree precisely, they all indicate that the dropout phenomenon is widespread. In recent years, more than one of four students leaves school without graduating. Although many of these students eventually return to school, a substantial proportion of a given cohort, more than 1 out of 10 persons, will not receive a high school diploma or equivalent.

The problem is more severe for some segments of the population than others. The National Commission of Secondary Education for Hispanics estimates that 45% of the Hispanic high school students in the United States drop out before graduating, for example, more than double the rate for Blacks and three times the rate for Whites. Forty percent of Hispanic students never reach 10th grade. Some studies also show that American Indians and Alaskan natives have very high dropout rates (Table 4). Blacks have a higher dropout rate than Whites (Tables 1 and 4).

High School and Beyond data also show that 1980 sophomores of low (bottom quartile) socioeconomic status (SES) had a higher dropout rate (17%) than students of high SES (5%). (The SES measure in this analysis is a composite of these variables: father's education, mother's education, father's occupation, family income and household items available.) The data also show that 1980 sophomores who reported their grades were "mostly D's or below" had a 43% dropout rate, compared to a 3% rate for students who reported "mostly A's." Students in vocational-technical and general programs had a higher dropout rate (15%, 13%) than students in academic programs (4%). Students in the West and South dropped out at higher rates than students in the rest of the country. Students in urban areas dropped out at higher rates than students in suburban and rural areas (Table 4).* The high rates for students in vocational-technical and general programs are perplexing because it has been assumed that these programs help keep academically weak students in school.

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*High School and Beyond data also show differences in dropout rates by student ability, parental involvement, type of school and physical condition.

How Dropouts Fare in Society

Although leaving school before completing graduation can be a positive step for some students, it is generally considered harmful by a society in which education is important to careers and economic success. Leaving school prematurely may cause loss of access to good jobs, reduced lifetime earnings, the risk of more and longer periods of unemployment, and consequent diminution of "quality of life." The consequences to society include reduced economic output, the likelihood of increased demand for unemployment benefits and welfare payments and possible increases in crime and other forms of antisocial behavior. Moreover, the adverse effects of dropping out of school may pass from one generation to another. Dropouts are less likely than high school graduates to provide favorable economic and educational opportunities to their children.

The Bureau of Census data have provided some justification for these concerns. In 1981, for example, 36% of high school dropouts were unemployed, compared to 21% of high school graduates not enrolled in college. In 1982, men and women 25 years old and older who did not complete high school earned about one-third less than those who had graduated (Table 5). In 1978, the U.S. Department of Justice found that the majority of inmates in local jails lacked a high school diploma — about 59% of White inmates and 63% of Black inmates.

HS&B data showed that many of the 1980 sophomores who left school without graduating experienced difficulties in employment. About 27% of male dropouts and 31% of female dropouts reported that they were looking for work in the first week of February 1982 (Table 6). Only about 60% of males and 33% of females were working for pay full- or part-time. Dropouts who were employed had jobs that did not require much training. Only about 14% of the males and 3% of the females did skilled trade work (Table 7). Other kinds of jobs often reported by males included: waiter (14%), manual laborer (12%), factory worker (11%), farm worker (9%) and gas station attendant (8%). Female dropouts were working as waitresses (23%), store clerks (15%), baby sitters (14%) and clerical workers (10%).

Dropping out of school unquestionably deprives students of many of the career and economic opportunities that are open to graduates. Most dropouts realize this. Within two years of dropping out, 51% of male and 55% of female dropouts of HS&B's 1980 sophomore cohort reported they felt that leaving school was not a good decision. Within this short period, a substantial number of them participated in some kind of training program outside of regular school (25% of male and 17% of female dropouts). About 14% of male and 9% of female dropouts took part in the General Educational Development (GED) program.

Reasons for Dropping Out of School

A number of studies have addressed the question of why students drop out of school (e.g., Rumberger, 1981). In the first follow-up survey of HS&B sophomore cohort of 1980 (spring 1982), students who dropped out of school during or after the sophomore year were asked to give their reasons. Their responses are presented below. (It should be noted that post hoc explanations by dropouts may be somewhat questionable, because of the complexity of the dropout phenomenon and the natural tendency to rationalize behavior others may regard as evidence of failure.)

The reason male dropouts cited most frequently was, "I had poor grades; I was not doing well in school" (36%). Next came "School was not for me; I did not like school" (35%), and "I was offered a job and I chose to work" (27%). "I couldn't get along with teachers" was the reason given by 21% of the male dropouts and "I was expelled or suspended" by 13%. About 14% indicated they dropped out to help support their families.

Females cited these four reasons most frequently: "I got married or planned to get married" (31%); "School was not for me" (31%); "I had poor grades" (30%); and "pregnancy" (23%). Eleven percent cited "offered a job"; 10% "couldn't get along with teachers."

Conclusion

In summary, the dropout rate in this nation is high. More than 25% of potential graduates (or more than one million youngsters) left school without graduating in recent years. The dropout rate is higher for Blacks, Hispanics, and generally for students from families of low socioeconomic status than for others. Since the dropout problem is also closely related to many broad social issues (like youth unemployment, transition of youth into the labor market, intergroup disparities in economic opportunity, higher labor productivity and increased competitiveness of American industry), an effort to obtain the information needed to describe and understand the dropout phenomenon would be a prudent investment for our society.

Table 1

Percent of High School Dropouts Among Persons 14 to 19 Years Old, by Race and Sex October 1971 and October 1981 (Civilian Noninstitutional Population)

Race and Sex	14-15 Years	16-17 Years	18-19 Years
October 1971			
All races			
Total	1.4	7.8	15.3
Male	1.3	6.8	15.7
Female	1.5	8.8	14.9
White			
Total	1.3	7.5	14.0
Male	1.1	6.4	14.2
Female	1.5	8.6	13.8
Black			
Total	1.6	9.3	24.1
Male	2.3	9.4	26.0
Female	1.0	9.2	22.5
October 1981			
All Races			
Total	2.0	7.8	16.0
Male	1.8	8.0	17.7
Female	2.2	7.6	14.4
White			
Total	1.8	7.8	15.5
Male	1.6	8.1	17.9
Female	2.0	7.5	13.2
Black			
Total	2.9	8.0	19.3
Male	2.7	7.2	18.9
Female	3.0	8.7	19.7

Note: Dropouts are persons who are not enrolled in school and who are not high school graduates.

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 241 and No. 373. These data also are shown in Table 59, Digest of Education Statistics, 1983-84, the National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education.

Table 2

Estimated Dropout Rates Based on Pupils Who Entered 5th Grade But Did Not Graduate in the Year of Graduation

School Year Pupils Entered 5th Grade	Year of Graduation	Percent Dropped Out
1958	1966	26.8
1960	1968	25.1
1962	1970	25.0
1964	1972	25.2
1966	1974	25.6
1968	1976	25.1
1970	1978	25.4
1972	1980	25.6

Source: Table 10, Digest of Education Statistics, 1982, by W.V. Grant and L.J. Eiden, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education.

Table 3

Percent of 17-Year-Old and 18-Year-Old Population Who Did Not Graduate From High School 1971-72 to 1981-82

	Percent of 17 Year Olds[1]	Percent of 18 Year Olds[2]
1971-72	24.3	24.5
1973-74	25.5	25.1
1975-76	26.1	26.2
1977-78	26.9	26.4
1979-80	28.3	28.5
1981-82	28.2	28.3

Notes:

1. Derived from Table 56, Digest of Education Statistics, 1983-84, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education.

2. Derived from Table 1.23, Condition of Education, 1984, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education.

Table 4

Students (Sophomores in 1980) Who Dropped Out Before Graduation, by Sex and Selected Background Variables

Background Variable	Male	Female	Total
All Students	14.7	12.6	13.6
Race/ethnicity			
American Indian and Alaskan Natives	27.2	31.8	29.2
Hispanic	18.1	18.0	18.0
Black	20.3	14.1	17.0
White	13.0	11.5	12.2
Asian American	3.5	2.7	3.1
Socioeconomic Status			
High	7.0	3.2	5.2
Middle	9.6	8.3	9.0
Low	17.8	17.1	17.4
Unknown	32.3	30.9	31.6
Community Type			
Urban	20.8	17.0	18.9
Suburban	12.5	11.0	11.8
Rural	13.6	12.0	12.8
Geographic Region			
Northeast	13.4	9.0	11.3
North Central	12.2	11.7	12.0
South	16.4	14.0	15.2
West	17.0	16.3	16.6
High School Program			
Academic	4.5	3.6	4.0
General	12.7	13.0	12.9
Vocational-technical	16.9	13.2	15.1
Self-reported Grade			
Mostly A's	2.0	3.5	2.9
Mostly B's	7.8	8.4	8.1
Mostly C's	18.1	19.1	18.5
Mostly D's	41.7	44.1	42.5

Source: High School and Beyond, NCES 83-221b, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education.

Table 5

Median and Mean Income (Dollars) of Persons 25 Years Old and Over in 1982, by Years of School Completed

	Elementary		High School		College	
	1 to 7	8	1 to 3	4	1 to 3	4
Female						
Median	3,868	4,657	4,930	6,965	8,583	13,484
Mean	4,659	5,655	6,119	8,512	10,298	14,516
Male						
Median	7,218	9,501	12,079	17,055	19,980	26,441
Mean	8,946	11,663	13,842	18,598	21,405	31,055

Source: Table 47 in E.J. Welniak and M.F. Henson, "Money Income of Households, Families and Persons in the United States: 1982,"Bureau of Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-60, No. 142.

Table 6

Selected Activities of Dropouts From 1980 Sophomore Cohort, in the First Week of February 1982, by Sex

Activity	Male	Female
Working for pay full- or part-time	59.6	33.0
Looking for work	27.3	31.4
Homemaker (no other work)	2.1	32.1

Source: High School and Beyond, NCES 83-221b, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education.

Table 7

Most Recent Jobs of Dropouts From 1980 Sophomore Cohort, by Sex

Kind of Work	Male	Female
	Percentage Distribution	
Total	100.0	100.0
Lawn work, odd jobs	6.0	2.9
Waiter, waitress	14.1	23.0
Baby sitting or child care	.1	14.0
Farm work	8.7	1.5
Factory work	10.9	8.0
Skilled trade	13.9	2.8
Other manual labor	12.1	8.1
Store clerk or salesperson	5.9	15.2
Office or clerical	1.2	10.2
Hospital or health	.9	2.5
Gas station, car wash	8.4	1.9
Delivery jobs	1.7	.4
Military	5.8	2.4
Other jobs	10.4	7.2

Note: If respondents had more than one job, they were asked to choose the job that paid them the most per week.

Source: High School and Beyond, NCES 83-221b, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education.

Table 8

Reasons for Dropping Out Cited by Dropouts From 1980 Sophomore Cohort, by Sex

Reasons	Male	Female
	Percent	
School Related		
1. Expelled or suspended	13.0	5.3
2. Had poor grades	35.9	29.7
3. School was not for me	34.8	31.1
4. School ground too dangerous	2.7	1.7
5. Didn't get into desired program	7.5	4.5
6. Couldn't get along with teachers	20.6	9.5
Family Related		
1. Married or planned to get married	6.9	30.7
2. Was pregnant	N.A.	23.4
3. Had to support family	13.6	8.3
Peer Related		
1. Friends were dropping out	6.5	2.4
2. Couldn't get along with students	5.4	5.9
Health Related		
Illness or disability	4.6	6.5
Other		
1. Offered job and chose to work	26.9	10.7
2. Wanted to enter military	7.2	.8
3. Moved too far from school	2.2	5.3
4. Wanted to travel	7.0	6.5

Note: Students might report more than one reason.

Source: High School and Beyond, NCES 83-221b, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education.

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